



EUROPEAN
MOVEMENT

MEPs, the European Parliament and Public Opinion

by Michael Barry

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Introduction

The European Parliament is the only directly elected political institution of the European Union. Since it was first directly elected in 1979 its powers have steadily grown, and the European Parliament and the MEPs of which it is composed now play a major part in enacting over 80 per cent of EU laws, which in turn affect much of national legislation.

With the extension of the European Parliament's powers of co-decision with the Council of Ministers on proposed EU laws; its share of power to determine – and if necessary reject as a whole – the EU budget, and its supervisory role over how the money is spent; its powers of scrutiny over the Commission's administrative and financial activities; and, most recently, the accountability to its Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee of the European Central Bank, the European Parliament is the citizens' voice in the power structure of the European Union. This was dramatically illustrated in 1999, when for fear that the Parliament would exercise its legitimate democratic power of dismissal over the unelected Commission, the Commission resigned.

Every citizen has benefited from a legislative assembly which has stood for the rights of the individual against powerful vested interests. In the fields of health and safety in the work place, competition policy and the environment, MEPs can genuinely point to many achievements as the champion of the consumer. From the safety of toys to the reduction of car exhaust emissions, everyone has benefited. In the UK, however, we are faced with a tide of propaganda about 'straight bananas' and choking regulations in which politicians from all parties and a largely foreign-owned press have conspired to deny the worth of the citizens' democratic voice. This conspiracy has resulted in a degree of ignorance and apathy which makes a mockery of our claim to be a sophisticated modern and knowledgeable democracy. In the European Elections of 2004 the turn out of voters was 38.9 per cent. Attached as Appendix I is the voter turn out for the whole of the European Union from 1979 to 2004. It can be seen that voter apathy is not confined to the UK. Throughout Europe the European Parliament has failed to catch the imagination or the interest of the majority of its citizens.

National governments have conceded that they are unable to deal effectively on their own with issues such as the environment, the economy and security and the EU has provided a framework in which the nation states can deal with common problems in an effective and democratic way. On the other hand, national governments continue to pursue their national interests and in their determination to assert their independence have presented themselves as the champion of the national interest against the encroachment of an alien supra national power. In the UK there is almost no co-operation between MPs and MEPs. MPs rest on their position as members of 'the mother of parliaments', their positions reinforced by the weight of tradition and the 'clouds of history'. They feel threatened by this supranational organisation which they perceive as a rival in the fields of agriculture, environment, trade and industry and immigration. They share a common interest with the executive in underplaying the role of the European Parliament as a valued ally in their efforts to improve 'the condition of the people'. They portray it as a convenient scapegoat, when faced with difficult problems whose solutions require compromise and cooperation amongst interdependent nation states.

This determination to represent the European Parliament and Westminster as rivals rather than as complementary institutions, lies at the heart of the public disillusion with the EU. The painting of the European Parliament as a threat rather than a complement to the national parliament has fuelled the rise of euro-scepticism. It has provided space for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and a legitimate championing of national interests has turned into a defensive argument which has begun to legitimise the case for the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Even the European Movement has been infected. Its briefing for members on the Constitutional Treaty is almost entirely defensive and does not mention the European Parliament once.

The role and rewards of MEPs

A major problem in the perception of the European Parliament and of MEPs is that their major pre-occupation is participating in a fraudulent 'gravy train'. This public perception is so ingrained, that attempts to argue against it are met with disbelief. Perhaps the best defence is if all members of the European Movement are familiar with the truth and are able to recite it when challenged.

MEPs are paid the same as their national parliamentary colleagues. In the case of the UK it currently stands at £57,485 per annum. There are additional monies for travel and subsistence when in Brussels and Strasbourg. Secretarial allowances of £6000 per month allow MEPs to employ 3-5 staff. MEPs voted a transparent compromise package in May 2004 but it was vetoed by the Council of Ministers in a behind-closed-doors session without giving their reasons to the public. There is a further allowance of about

£2000 per month to cover the funding of a constituency office which includes rent, stationery, computers, phone bills, subscriptions etc. Additional monies are available from a fund called 3701 which are to support the MEP's work in projects which promote the parliament and the work of the European parties. These can be used for activities such as annual reports to constituents, mailings to interest groups and organising conferences and seminars. These funds are strictly audited and cannot be used in the run up to elections, European, national or local. There is no budget beyond this to support any work in the constituency. For example any travel in the constituency is done at an MEPs own expense.

MEPs have proper jobs to do as legislators. Work and positions are shared among the political groups in the European Parliament. Use of the D'Hondt system to determine who gets what ensures a fair allocation in proportion to their electoral strength and numbers. During the course of a parliamentary term every active member, even if they belong to a minority group, is likely to have the opportunity to become a rapporteur, the person who prepares the first draft of Parliament's response to a legislative proposal - roughly equivalent to being a winner in the Private Members' Ballot in the House of Commons. Even as a shadow spokesman they are likely to be frequently involved in negotiating compromises and agreements with representatives from other political groups.

Every MEP sits on at least one of the major committees, which have both legislative and horizontal political responsibilities. In effect they combine the role played by standing and select committees at Westminster. Unlike the former, which are dissolved as soon as their scrutiny of a single piece of legislation is complete, they are established at the beginning of each parliamentary mandate and their membership retains a strong common thread throughout the 5-year term.

While standing committees in the House of Commons permit MPs to cross swords only with the minister responsible for the legislation, European Parliament committees have the right to examine the Commission officials who drafted the proposals and pose questions of detail.

The Parliament's committee structure enables members to develop expertise in their subject area. It permits the legislators who piloted a measure through the parliamentary process to be involved in monitoring its progress and performance at a later date.

Many of the pro-European political figures in the UK are ambivalent towards the European Parliament and share the perception that the European Parliament is a rival to the institution which has nurtured their rise to power. Both they and Euro-sceptics share a common interest in maintaining the impression of the European Parliament as an unknown interfering bureaucratic institution which they have no interest in promoting

as a rival to their own position. The European Parliament itself has adopted a very low key and pedestrian approach to selling itself to its citizens and the UK national office of the parliament has been notable by its absence in acting as a champion.

This offers the European Movement an opportunity to establish a pivotal position in the debate about Britain's positive engagement with Europe. It should be a core objective of the European Movement to act as a champion of the European Parliament and the MEPs who are the directly elected representatives of the citizens of Europe. There are several ways in which a membership organisation made up of well informed, articulate and committed members can make a contribution.

MEPs, the European Parliament and the media

MEPs find it difficult to gain a space in all sections of the media. They in common with back benchers at Westminster find it hard to develop a newsworthy identity. Although one or two MEPs such as Baroness Nicholson on human rights and Chris Huhne on economic matters are notable exceptions, MEPs are rarely invited to participate in radio or television programmes even when, as in the debate on the Euro or the Constitutional Treaty, they might be expected to have particular expertise.

Some MPs claim that the real problem is the poor calibre of MEPs and in particular their inability to forge an identity with their local media or a relationship with their electorate. This may or may not be true; but it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that national governments have tried to ensure that the electorate's attention is drawn away from issues over which the European Parliament has jurisdiction and where the importance of MEPs to the 'condition of the people' might be revealed.

This determination to distract the electorate from the role of the European Parliament was underlined by the fact that in the 2004 elections all three main parties studiously campaigned on any available issue which was not a European one. In programme after programme Westminster politicians were questioned and interviewed about issues over which the European Parliament has no jurisdiction. Apart from a few very mild objections, the media wholeheartedly joined in this distortion of the democratic process. The activity of politicians and media was so outrageous that it even provoked the UK office of the European Parliament to make a small but public protest on television. The notable exception was the platform given to Robert Kilroy-Silk on 'Question Time'. If a voice could be given to a candidate from UKIP, why not give one to either a pro-European candidate or at least one from the main parties? Surely the outstanding record of, for example, the pro-European Conservative Roy Perry, was more deserving of a platform than the demagogic raving of an out-of-work day-time television host. Very few MEPs have been invited to appear on Question Time since its inception. The

appearance in general of MEPs on all radio and television channels is disproportionately small to their influence over 50 per cent of all Westminster legislation.

MEPs can expect to receive little help from their Westminster colleagues in their battle for space in the media; they are seen as competitors. The London office of the European Parliament does not seem to see it as part of its brief to explain to the British people the role of MEPs. It is fanciful to believe that the tabloid press will be prepared to present a balanced argument. This represents an opportunity for the European Movement. **The European Movement should adopt as a core activity a campaign to champion MEPs and the European Parliament in the media.**

- The BBC has a statutory duty to maintain fairness and impartiality. The European Movement should seek to give evidence to the committee considering the renewal of the BBC's charter and explain our concern that the BBC is adding to the UK democratic deficit by its failure to give reasonable space to the reporting of matters vital to UK citizens in the European Parliament.
- We should make specific proposals that MEPs should be given airtime consistent with their importance to UK legislation and that for example *Yesterday in Parliament* should include a slot *Yesterday in the European Parliament*.

This approach should be made by the Movement's board and should be accompanied by a campaign of letter writing to a selected list of the BBC's Board of Governors, producers and presenters at both local and national level. The campaign should be coordinated by a designated Board member, but managed by the Branch Chairmen who should each accept clear targets within a planned campaign. The Board should provide letter templates but Branch Chairmen should be encouraged to agree targets with their branch members and to monitor progress as a key agenda item at branch meetings.

- The Movement should draw up a list of, say, twelve newspaper columnists sympathetic to our cause and ensure that their attention is drawn on a regular basis to events in the European Parliament.
- Their attention should also be drawn to any distortions of the truth by Westminster politicians.

Again, one Board member should accept responsibility for this campaign but he or she should recruit a team of non Board members willing to take part in what we can make an enjoyable and productive activity.

- We need to be much more active in letter writing to the local press. We do have some effective letter writers but our activity compares very badly with the well-planned activity of the UKIP.

- Each branch chairman should accept responsibility for a specific number of writing attempts as part of his responsibilities. Many branches do have a member responsible for press relations, but our efforts seem to be largely a reaction to the opposition.
- If we are to be effective we must be prepared to accept a degree of discipline and a determination to achieve targets.

Again a member of the Board should retain specific responsibility for leading this activity and reporting on its progress to the Board and the AGM.

This kind of approach has some implications for the structure of the Movement Board. A logical conclusion is that Board members should have specific defined responsibilities for which they should be responsible and for which they should be prepared to report to the Movement. It would combine a specific purpose with the privilege of being a Board member. It also requires a contribution from members. My experience in travelling round the country and meeting members is that they are frustrated by what they see as a lack of purpose and a lack of a clear understanding of what the movement is trying to achieve. We should seek to channel this frustration into creative activity.

MEPs as Regional Representatives

The electoral system adopted for 1994 and for 2004 of party lists of regional representatives with no structural relationship to either member constituencies or regional authorities ensured that MEPs both remained anonymous and subject to the whims of party activists. The system differs from Westminster elections where, although candidates are selected by party members after initial approval by party central authorities, candidates are also expected to appeal directly to the electorate. There have been many occasions where a party apparatchik foisted on a constituency has retired to obscurity after suffering a bloody nose from the electorate.

A list of names under a party banner is surely not a step towards open and participative democracy. Perhaps the most blatant abuse was the Conservative Party where a place on the list rested on the candidate's degree of euroscepticism and a number of able people with excellent records and impeccable Conservative credentials, apart from their support for the European Union, found themselves demoted to unwinnable place numbers on the party list. The system was also exploited by the Labour Party which used it to ensure that those 'on message' gained the winning numbers. This is not to deny that political parties are perfectly entitled to choose their preferred candidates. It simply argues that the supposedly democratic European Union has provided them with the mechanism to carry out their manoeuvrings protected from the critical gaze of the uncommitted citizen.

The European Movement should stimulate a debate about the system of election to the European Parliament. We should take the initiative in approaching other non- governmental organisations such as the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Federal Trust and universities to see whether we can encourage a national debate about the matter.

There is a discontinuity in identifying MEPs as regional representatives when they have no relationship with any form of regional governance. The government in its White Paper, *'Your Region Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions,'* has set out proposals for a system of regional government based on regional assemblies, some elected some appointed. From a European Movement perspective this is a difficult area because there is no political consensus on the matter. The Conservative Party is against regional assemblies which they consider to be another layer of expensive governance. On this issue, the European Movement must remain neutral.

Nevertheless, there is an opportunity for the European Movement to make a positive contribution to the debate and at the same time seek to enhance the role of MEPs.

If MEPs are increasingly seen as regional representatives and if the UK is to proceed along the path of Regional Assemblies, it seems illogical for there to be no defined relationship between the two. Proposals to enhance the role of MEPs come up against the problem of competition with Westminster MPs who are, after all, collectively by the vote of their constituents, representing regions at Westminster. Nevertheless it should be possible to design a structure where an MEP can both champion his or her region in the European Parliament and also make his expertise available to regional assemblies.

It is proposed that we present a paper to the ODPM recommending that there should indeed be a relationship between MEPs and Regional Assemblies and that MEPs should be given speaking, but not voting, rights in Regional Assemblies. It would make our campaign more effective if it were to be directed both centrally and regionally. A Board member should accept responsibility for the overall campaign and Branch Chairmen should depute one of their members to act as a focus for a regional campaign. We have a number of members with strong influence at regional level and we should seek to involve them and encourage them to use their contacts and expertise in a concrete way to further the European ideal.

MEPs and the Westminster Parliament

There have been some attempts to include MEPs within Ministerial teams and some MEPs have been given the status of Parliamentary Private Secretaries within these teams. Members of the European Parliamentary Labour Party are now entitled to go to

the meetings of the Parliamentary Labour Party when their particular subject is being debated. This seems a sensible way to ensure that legislative proposals take account of the European dimension, but the practice has not been extended to their Opposition shadows. In general MEPs have no locus in the Westminster parliament and any attempt to give them any power would be fiercely resisted and undoubtedly defeated.

There are some simple measures which could be adopted such as video links between the two Parliaments and easier access to the Westminster Parliament for MEPs. But given that over 50 per cent of Westminster legislation is affected in some way by European legislation, it would seem sensible for the Westminster Parliament to develop mechanisms where it can call on the expertise of MEPs without compromising its independence and without in any way challenging the concept of subsidiarity.

The European Parliament is a legislative chamber dealing with technical matters which, although on the face of it are unexciting, are highly relevant to the citizens' lives and important to them as consumers. The European Parliament has a well developed system of committees whose members, which include UK MEPs, have gained a great deal of expertise in revising and producing good legislation.

There are three areas where it would seem sensible for the Westminster Parliament to call on this expertise:

- When the Upper House is revising legislation, which has a 'European' dimension.
- When Select Committees are examining technical matters and matters with a 'European' dimension.
- When Joint Committees of the Westminster Parliament are considering constitutional matters; these will now almost always need some form of consideration about the impact of the constitutional treaties which make up the framework for our relationship with the European Union.

There is no political consensus in the UK about the role, the make-up or the system of election to the Upper House. There does seem to be a move towards the extension of devolution to the English regions and the establishment of some form of democratic representation at regional level. There have been some proposals to combine reform of the Upper House with the development of Regional Government. Perhaps its membership should be partly made up of regional representatives, although without consensus it is difficult to see how reform will be achieved. MEPs could however make a contribution to the Upper House as presently constituted and with its present function as a revising chamber. Some of the revising of legislation is required to make it consistent with the legislative framework already passed or perhaps contemplated by the European Parliament. UK MEPs are British citizens with a particular expertise in this field.

If the objective of the Upper House is to produce good legislation it would seem sensible for it to call on this expertise and to seek its advice in the drafting of legislation. This would create a relationship between the European Parliament and the Westminster Parliament without in any way encroaching upon the national sovereignty of Westminster.

It is proposed that the European Movement recommend that MEPs should be granted speaking, but not voting, rights in the House of Lords. One Board member should accept responsibility for working up the proposal, the process of which should include wide consultation within the movement with the objective of presenting it as evidence when the government next embarks on proposals for the reform of the Upper House.

Select Committees play an increasing role in the examination of technical issues in the legislative process leading to the drafting of good law. The deliberations of some Select Committees for example on the Environment, the Office of Communication or Transport are directly affected by European legislation. MEPs clearly represent an expertise resource which it is surely in the interests of good governance to harness. Again it would be important not to give the impression in any way that this was a threat to the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament.

It is proposed that the European Movement prepare a paper on the granting of speaking, but not voting, rights to MEPs in Select Committees. A Board member should accept overall responsibility for the paper and should include in the work wide consultation amongst the members of the Movement. We should seek the opinions of a wide cross section of MPs and should see as the objective a paper circulated to all pro European MPs.

It has been a convention that proposals for constitutional reform should consist of a standing committee of both houses of Parliament or a Speaker's Committee. It is now inevitable that all proposals for constitutional reform will need to take into account the constitutional treaties which form our relationship with the European Union. MEPs are elected representatives of the people, whose power derives from those treaties. They surely now have a locus in debates on constitutional reform.

It is proposed that MEPs should be members of any committee of the Westminster Parliament whose remit is the consideration of constitutional reform. The first stage should be to seek the support of pro-European MPs. Perhaps this could be a designated task for our MP board members.

Conclusion

The European Union provides a framework in which the nation states of Europe can deal with their common problems in an effective and democratic way. The legitimate determination of Westminster politicians to defend the sovereignty of the United Kingdom has been distorted into a defensive posture where even the most pro-European politicians fight on eurosceptic terms and the UK's very membership of the European Union is now on the political agenda.

MEPs are the democratically elected representatives of the citizens of the UK within the European Union, but a combination of timidity by the pro-Europeans and fear of competition by Westminster politicians has meant that their contribution to the condition of the people has been hidden from the electorate. The European Movement should accept as the core of a new Movement plan the proposals outlined in this paper to champion the cause of the European Union, the European Parliament and our democratically elected representatives within the Union.

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Appendix I

Voter turnout 1979 and 2004 in the EU-15

Country	1979	1984	1989	1994 (95: SE, AT, FI)	1999	2004	Trend
Austria				67.7	49.4	41.8	Downward
Belgium	91.4	92.2	90.7	90.7	91.0	90.8	Downward *
Denmark	47.8	52.2	47.4	52.9	50.5	47.8	Downward
Finland				57.6	31.4	41.1	Upward
France	60.7	56.7	48.8	52.7	46.8	43.1	Downward
Germany	65.7	56.8	62.3	60.0	45.2	43	Downward
Greece	78.6	77.2	80.1	80.4	75.3	62.8	Downward *
Ireland	63.6	47.6	68.3	44.0	50.2	59.7	Upward
Italy	84.9	83.4	81.4	74.8	70.8	73.1	Upward
Luxembg	88.9	87.0	96.2	88.5	87.3	90	Upward *
Netherlids	58.1	50.6	47.5	35.6	30.0	39.1	Upward
Portugal		72.4	51.2	35.5	40	38.7	Downward
Spain		68.9	54.7	59.1	63	45.9	Downward
Sweden				41.6	38.8	37.2	Downward
UK	32.2	31.8	36.6	36.4	24.0	38.9	Upward
–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Cyprus						71.19	
Czech Rep						27.9	
Estonia						26.89	
Hungary						38.47	
Latvia						41.23	
Lithuania						48.2	
Malta						82.4	
Poland						20.4	
Slovakia						16.7	
Slovenia						28.3	

* = mandatory voting

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The European Movement (EM-UK) is an all-party, membership-based, non-governmental organisation with branches throughout the UK. It is part of a network of similar organisations across Europe, founded in 1948 at The Hague following a call by Sir Winston Churchill for increased co-operation and unity among European peoples and nations. EM-UK exists to put the case for constructive British engagement with Europe and to lead the debate on Britain's future role in Europe.



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